

**Western Folklife Center
America Works Project**

Interview Log

**Gordon "Gordie" Miller
interviewed by Charlie Seemann
at Elko, Nevada, October 20, 2011**

*Log prepared by Steve Green
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Note: Charlie Seemann is Executive Director of the Western Folklife Center; Steve Green is Archivist at the Western Folklife Center.

Note: Time stamps are approximate, as generated by the logging software (Transcriba).

00:02. Introductory slate.

Interview slate announced by Charlie Seemann.

00:16. What kind of jobs has Gordie had in the past?

Truck driving, for 20-21 years. He's hauled various things: lumber, produce, heavy equipment. He did that a long time, and being on the road got old.

00:47. Where did he learn to drive a truck?

He taught himself. He didn't go to [truck driving] school. Trial and error. You screw up once in awhile and learn from those mistakes. Never had a teacher.

01:04. He drives what—an eighteen wheeler?

Eighteen wheelers. Flatbed, and reefer trucks that produce comes in. He's hauled produce all over Arizona. Lumber. A little "heavy haul" when he came to Elko. [He drove in] Washington State, Oregon, wherever they needed him. It got old. He got tired of being on the road.

01:35. What sort of work is he doing now?

He works for Barrick Goldstrike of North America. A gold mine. He needed to get off the road; it was killing him. Barrick [offered] a good job. He worked nights all his life, so the hours he works now didn't really bother him. He gets to operate heavy equipment now. It's mainly what he does--equipment operator.

02:05. What kind of equipment?

He runs a bulldozer, a blade, a rubber tire dozer. The big ones, D-10. That's a dozer. The rubber tire dozer's are bigger than that. He also drives a 330-ton haul truck. And whatever else they have.

02:27. He's working on the surface? Not below ground?

No, he doesn't go underground. "I'll be there soon enough!" He works mainly in the open pit. It's a lot of fun. He enjoys it. "Where else can you make this kind of money to go play in a big dirt pile?"

02:51. How did he wind up in this present job?

His wife was born and raised in Elko, Nevada. He met her in Arizona. They got married. She

decided she wanted to be closer to her family. He fought it for awhile, but "finally, she won!" They moved to Nevada so she could be closer to her folks. Her dad wasn't doing too well. Gordie drove truck for the first eight years he was in Nevada. He hauled [box? block?] cement. He hauled his cement to the mines. Going in and out of the mines, he could see all the equipment, thought it looked like a fun job. "So, I gave it a shot." He's now been there eight years. Getting pretty close to retirement, so he'll stick around. "They take pretty good care of me."

03:52. Mine jobs rumored to be great; everyone wants to work for the mines.

They do. But right now, they are having to hire a lot of people without experience. The old experienced miners have retired. The next generation has to come in and take over. They're going to have to learn how to do this. It can be a stressful job.

04:19. What kind of training did he get when he first came [to work at Barrick]?

When he came on eight years ago, they put him in a classroom for the first week. Book work, a little about the company, a lot about the equipment. MSHA [Mine Safety and Health Administration] and all that stuff. After that, they take you out, put you in a truck, and "let you ride around for a couple of days." You're with a trainer the first three or four weeks. When they think you're ready, they turn you loose. [Discussion of what MSHA stands for].

05:17. Everybody watches out for MSHA.

It's like OSHA in the regular workplace. MSHA is strictly for the mining industry, gravel pits, stuff like that. They're pretty strict.

05:36. What ages are new younger recruits coming in at?

A lot are coming in at 23, 24, 25 years old. They haven't had a long-term job yet. Some might be coming just out of college, or maybe a year of college. He's seeing that sons and daughters of people he works with are coming to work there. In his group, there's one guy with two sons straight out of high school.

06:12. So, it's becoming a generational type thing.

He thinks so. It's a good paying job. They can come right out of high school and make good money.

06:22. The local college trains a lot of them too?

They do. They have a program where you can go to work for Barrick, they'll send you to school, pay for all your schooling, tools... apprenticeship program. That's where a lot of the mechanics come from. There are electricians, and so forth.

06:49. School is expensive; to have the mine pay your way and then hire you with a good salary right out of college...

He understands that Great Basin College has a program for hydraulics, stuff like that... it's outstanding. They [new recruits] do get some good training. For Gordie, it's a benefit. He likes to have a good mechanic when he's running big equipment. You want to make sure it's in tip-top shape.

07:19. People come from all over the world to work out here.

They do. There are people from Africa here, Canada, Australians. Not only do they come here to Nevada, but Barrick has mines all over the world. Right now, there are guys that are over in Africa, working there, doing a six month tour. He's thought about it, but decided it wasn't for him. He's talked to some guys that have been over there. They told him he might like it, but... you just never know.

08:09. Has he seen much change in the way things are done, in the time he's worked for Barrick?

He sees the younger generation coming in. Just in the way things are done. Some of it doesn't make sense to the older guys. You can see the change in the way they approach jobs, the way they approach the environment. He does see changes for the good, as far leaving the ground the way they found it. After they dig up the ground, they "reclaim" it. They're doing an excellent job. They will not pollute the ground, that's for sure. They really watch that...That's one of their main focuses. To him, that's important.

09:12. Do most of the younger kids have a pretty good attitude and work ethic?

They haven't got there yet. For awhile he was training new guys coming in [to drive] trucks. "Some of them just—they don't even know why they're there." They don't like the hours because they have to work a weekend. Mine employees work strange hours.

09:39. What kind of hours do they work?

Gordie is on his three days off now. His rotation will start. He will work four night shifts—twelve and a half hour shifts. He gets on the bus at 5:30 in the evening [to go to the mine] and he doesn't get back to town until 8:20 in the morning. He will go to work on a Friday night, work four night shifts, then he has Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday off, then he goes back to work the following Friday on day shifts, same hours, same times, he'll work three day shifts, then he has one day off, then he goes back Tuesday night, and he'll work three night shifts, then he'll have three days off, he has the weekend off, then he goes back and works four day shifts, and then he has seven days off. You're ready for seven days off. Everybody says you get used to it, but he thinks you don't. You just do it. Your body never gets in a rhythm or routine. You just do it. He's starting to feel it now. These night shifts, they're getting harder and harder for him to take. That's a lot of the problem with the younger kids. They don't like those hours, and they don't like working weekends.

11:10. It cuts in on their partying!

It does! You'll see some of them, they'll come in, they'll work for maybe two months then say "the hell with this." They can't fathom working a weekend.

11:39. Opportunity. There's no limit to how far you can go.

There isn't. "You can go a long ways in this business." A kid coming out of high school can start out at almost twenty bucks an hour. Where else are you going to find that? And benefits. Good benefits. So there's no limit to what you can do within the company.

12:06. The mines in Nevada are not unionized, are they?

No. He doesn't think Newmont is anymore. They were for awhile, but [Nevada] is a right-to-work state, you didn't have to belong to the union. When you have a right-to-work state and a union, all you have is turmoil. And they always keep it stirred up.

12:26. It seems like the mines are good to people, the way they pay and take care of you...

They don't need 'em [unions]. He will say for Barrick, they treat their employees very well. They take good care of them. He has no complaints about the hours he works. If you break it down, he only works fourteen days a month.

12:51. Yes, but those are twelve-hour days...

When you work, that's what you do. "Eat, sleep and work. That's it."

12:57. What is a typical work day like?

It depends on what he does when he gets to work. When he gets off the bus, they bring the crew into the "muster room." He gets on the bus [in Elko]. It leaves at 5:35 (a.m. or p.m.). It takes about an hour and fifteen minutes to get there and back [meaning, that time is added to the work day]. When you get out there, you get off the bus, get your hard hat or whatever, go to the muster room. They print out a "lineout." Your name will be on there. It will tell you what piece of equipment you'll be on for that shift. A lot of guys have their own piece of equipment, a truck or a blade or dozer. He just floats around, wherever they need him. He kind of likes it. It's something different every night. He might work three days on one piece of equipment and two days on another. That [time in the muster room] usually takes about fifteen minutes. Then you get on another bus. They have what they call a "hot change." The equipment never shuts down. It runs 24/7, 365 days a year except for holidays. So he gets on a smaller bus, it takes you to your piece of equipment, and the person there gets off that piece of equipment and gets in the bus and goes home. You get on the equipment. That extra half hour, what they call a "hot change," they get paid ten hours overtime every pay period. It's built in. Every pay period, you get ten hours whether you work overtime or not. It's kinda nice. Then, for the first hour, if you're running a truck, you run off of one shovel. That's where they make their money. The first-hour tons and last-hour tons. If he's running a blade, he just maintains the roads, makes sure the truck drivers are happy.

15:14. What is the place like where he's doing this? Down in the pit, or above ground...

Above ground. He thinks the pits are about a mile deep. The pit is probably a mile and half wide. When you head into the pit, you are going in a big circle [spiraling down]. There are tight switchbacks. There are shovels digging at the 4200 level. When you get loaded, you have to come all the way to the top of the pit. That's a twenty-minute ride. These trucks only run five, six, seven miles an hour, loaded. Normally, in a good shift, you'll get fifteen loads, eighteen if you hustle. They have speed limits. It's just like being on the highway.

16:27. Safety. Is it pretty dangerous?

It is. Safety is a big issue and they push it hard. They have to. The equipment changes when the weather changes, it's just plain dangerous. If you're not paying attention, the game can change on you real quick, in just seconds. Every Thursday [Monday] of the day shifts, they have a safety meeting where the whole crew gets together before they start work. They tell employees what's going on out in the pit, how things are changing. They have what they call "SOS." Surveyors of Safety. There are five or six guys in a program. They maintain behaviors, attitudes. Safety is a big issue. It has to be. People get killed so quickly.

17:52. The huge machines are all going at the same time...

Picture this. Your pit looks like a comb. Now they are getting towards the bottom of the pit. When you get forty trucks down [at the bottom], three huge shovels, and they're within two hundred yards of each other, it's not much room for a big truck to maneuver. It's tight, and you've got to really be on the ball, especially at night. It's a whole different world out there at night. They don't light it up. The only light you have are your headlights and the shovel's lights.

18:45. What are they moving? They bring the ore up from...

Right now, the shovels are getting close to the ore. They have to move a lot of waste just to get to that ore. They've been moving waste for about six months. But now they're getting to the ore. The shovel loads the ore on to the truck, and he [the truck] takes it to the ore piles, either the roaster or the mill, where they process it. He doesn't see any of the gold, doesn't see how they process it or anything. He just hauls the dirt. But there are nights when the dispatcher will tell you "that load's

worth about two hundred thousand dollars." So you just be careful, and make sure you dump it in the right spot. That's the big thing. Because they have had guys dump it in the wrong spot, then they have to go sort it out.... It's a bad deal when you do that. They will "take you to the water shed," meaning they will drug test you over something like that. It's very important to put it where it's supposed to be.

20:05. Is drug testing a big deal all through [the mine site]?

Yes, they do random testing. Your name kicks out of a computer and they've got like two hours to get you in there. It happens regularly. Sometimes they'll do the whole crew.

20:23. Safety records—some of the companies look like they have good records.

They do. In the muster room at Barrick, each crew—there are four crews, A, B, C, D— each crew has a banner, and they put on it how many days they go without an accident or how many hours or days without a lost-time accident. Also, at the guard shack when they come in, there's a billboard that shows how many accidents for the whole mine site for the month. So safety is—"They brand it in your mind." "If you have any concept of what goes on out there, you would see why." He would advise anyone to go take a tour because it's pretty interesting.

21:31. Barrick is continually growing. When they took over Placer Dome, over at Cortez, that mine life is good for about thirty-five years right now. So Elko is going to see a big expansion in the next five, six, seven years.

21:51. Which mine is he at?

He is at the Betsy Pit, which is [operated by] Barrick Goldstrike North. [Also mentions Cortez, and another mine in Eureka, Nevada and several out of the country]. He could transfer wherever he wanted to go. That's what he means, there's such an opportunity for a younger guy to go wherever he wants.

22:34. What does he like about his current job?

He loves operating the equipment. It's fun. They look like a big Tonka Toy. You can't hurt anything out there except yourself. All you're doing is playing in the dirt. It's a big sand pile. If you work on a dump, you push dirt over the side. That's all you do, but you have to be able to maintain a grade. Floors have to be flat. You have to maintain a certain grade all the way through. It's a little bit technical. They do have GPS on the machines. You can build a ramp, build a road, at 8% [grade]. Just punch in the project on a computer, it'll draw you a picture and show you exactly what you need to do.

23:32. Charlie brings up technology.

The blades don't have it. You just have to learn how to keep the roads flat. But on the dozers, the [computer?] [GPS?] will tell you what grade you're sitting at. Same way with the trucks. You don't have to talk to anybody. There is a little dispatch panel. It tells you what shovel to go load at. When you get loaded, push a button, it will tell you which dump to take it to. You go dump it. Push another button, it will tell you which shovel to go back to. You really don't have to talk to anybody, unless you have a problem. With GPS they can track you wherever you are. If they need to get ahold of you, they can call you or get you on the radio.

24:24. Are the cabs comfortable?

Yes. They just put new seats in all the trucks. They have heaters in them.

24:33. Radios?

XM Stereo. Every piece of equipment has XM. They want you to be comfortable. It makes your

day that much easier. It takes a lot of stress off.

24:46. They don't see the radio as a distraction?

No. You still have to listen to the mine radio. There's information that you need to know at certain times.

25:06. What does he wish he could change about his job?

He doesn't think there's much he would change. There's certain ways you could do things that might make it easier, but... he leaves that up to the engineers. Sometimes he thinks their decisions are stupid, but there's a reason for them doing it. He might complain once in awhile, but they seem to think this is the way they want it done, so... he does it. There's not a lot he would change. When they bring the younger generation on board, he wonders how they could give them a better work ethic. For some reason they [younger workers] have a don't-give-a-shit attitude.

26:06. What advice would you give them [younger workers]?

When he was training [i.e. teaching] he would tell them, "if you're not paying attention, you're either gonna hurt yourself, or you're gonna hurt somebody else." Things change in a second. He's seen high walls cave in. Right now, they're dealing with "big voids" down where the big shovels are in the bottom of the pit. What he means by a "void," there's one... [like a sinkhole] they dumped forty-fifty loads of dirt out of these big trucks, which is 300 tons, they never found the bottom. They never filled it up. There's three or four shovels digging around this thing. They have it coned off, but... is there another one close by? You don't know. A big void, there's nothing there, like a huge sinkhole. So he tells these young kids, you have to pay attention. If you can't, you don't need to be out here, because it's too dangerous. You have to be on your toes the whole twelve hours. Not just three quarters of the shift. Every minute you're awake, you have to be paying attention.

27:34. Charlie mentions retirement.

In four more years, Gordie will be 62. He would like to retire then. He works hard. He and his wife are trying to pay off everything that they can. He wants to be able to enjoy life. He doesn't want to work until he's 70.

28:09. What does he think he'll do when he retires?

He wants to be like a snowbird. He doesn't like the winter so he won't live in Elko in the winter. He'll go to Arizona and stay for a couple of months. He loves the summers in Elko because it doesn't get real hot. There's good fishing. He loves to fish and four-wheel. He thinks they will spend summers in Elko area, go south in the wintertime.

28:37. Anything else important that Charlie hasn't asked about yet?

He thinks people should go out and take a look at what is going on [at the mines] outside of Elko. The mines employ 90% of the people in the area. The economy depends on it. If the mines moved out, he doesn't think there'd be much left in Elko. Doesn't think it could support itself [without mining].

29:21. Charlie recalls when gold prices were down, people were being laid off. Boom and bust—right now it's a boom.

Gordie thinks the price of gold will hover where it's at. The price is there to stay. These gold mines... the new mines that are going to be coming on line, "they're saying the ore is hotter than the Carlin Trend." The [ore vein] over in the Pequops [mountains] is rumored to be very rich.

30:07. So, the area [around Elko] has a lot of years [left for mines to work]...

Yes.

30:12. It takes several years to get a mine up and running.

It does. Barrick has one, called [Arturo?]. Over on the old Dunphy highway where Newmont had an old underground mine. They've been working on getting that ready for the last four years. They finally got their permits. It should be up and running in the summer of 2012. It's a smaller pit, but there's an underground [mine] there. There's some "hot" ore down there, so they're going to truck it. It's going to be, like, ten miles.

30:46. What's the life span of a mine like that?

They're saying twenty, twenty-five years. He started in 2003 with Barrick. They were telling him at that time that the mine life was ten, twelve years. Now, what they're saying with what they're finding in their exploration, they have another fifteen years.

31:11. They have better methods for extracting the gold.

Yes. They have better methods of finding what they need, what they want. Their exploration has really improved. There's a lot of ore they missed the first time. They are re-digging some of the waste because there's ore down there.

31:32. And with prices like this, it's worth doing.

Oh yeah. They're going to go after it. "You're going to see the mines here for a long time." It's good for this economy. He knows a lot of people are really upset because they don't want the town to grow. It's the only way it can go—it has to grow. It can't be a small town anymore.

31:57. Nobody likes to see things changing. Charlie mentions Elko population.

It is a tiny town. The businesses are going to have to expand. [Talk about shopping center and new stores in town. Talk about shopping opportunities for people in Elko.]

32:26. Thanks and goodbyes.

[Talk about going underground on mine tour].

END OF INTERVIEW